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Photographer documents life in Darfur

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Photographer Barbara Grover spent seven weeks documenting the lives of Darfuri refugees

"When I first got to Iridimi and saw there was nothing, I asked myself: Is this really a place where a person can live?"

So confided one Darfuri refugee to photographer Barbara Grover, who visited the Iridimi refugee camp in Chad last year to document the lives of those displaced by the genocide in Darfur. The collection of images Grover brought back offers a tentative answer: Her portraits depict a people traumatized by war, yet able -- through the aid of relief agencies

and the sustaining human spirit -- to maintain a measure of hope.

The 25 photographs that compose "Refuge(e): Moments with the Darfuri of Iridimi," Grover's exhibit now on display at the Sherry Frumkin Gallery in Santa Monica, offer fresh insight into an ongoing crisis to which many Americans no longer relate, the award-winning artist said.

"One of the problems with world conflicts of this scale is that people hear about the fighting and the killing, and at some point, they become immune to this situation that goes on and on," said Grover of Silver Lake. "At some point, I believe people become almost combat fatigued. People need to reconnect to these issues on a human level. Until people understand the struggle that refugees go through every day, they won't understand the severity of the situation."

About 2.7 million people in Darfur have been driven from their homes by government-sanctioned Arab militias since 2003, according to the nonprofit Jewish World Watch (JWW), a coalition of Los Angeles-area synagogues that advocates against genocide globally. At least 400,000 non-Arab Muslims have been killed, and women are routinely beaten and raped. More than 17,000 refugees who have fled the violence in Darfur live at Iridimi, an arid desert camp just across the Chadian border from the strife-torn region of Sudan.

In May 2007, Grover obtained a grant from JWW and special permission from the United Nations to spend an unprecedented seven weeks in Iridimi. She wanted to explore the crisis beyond the genocidal atrocities exposed by other photographers and humanize the situation for a wider audience, she said.

"I felt that by spending an extended period of time in a refugee camp, I could bring back stories and images that

you can't possibly get when you're just there for a couple of days," Grover said. "After so many years, refugees have to find a way to continue each day. I wanted to show how they're rebuilding their lives."

During her time in Chad, Grover stayed at the U.N. compound or with the relief organization, CARE International, but spent each day in the sun-parched, 4-square-mile Iridimi camp, where temperatures often hovered at 115 degrees. The refugees eventually warmed to her presence and allowed Grover to point her lens at the most mundane details of their lives.

"They knew I was there because I wanted to give them a voice and tell their stories," she said. "Day after day, they got used to me, and they were very taken that someone really wanted to get to know them that well and bring their struggle to the world."



Grover's photographs depict a displaced society working to eke out a spare existence in the naked desert. They show refugees engaged in life-sustaining tasks -- food preparation, reading, women carrying water and firewood. The images are marked by clear light, unexpectedly vivid clothing and even the startling white flash of a little girl's smile. But beneath the seeming light-heartedness, Grover said, is an undercurrent of need, depression and desperation.

"Even though the photographs are in color, and I think people initially see more joyous faces than they do in the other photos out of [refugee camps], people are struggling," she said. "They're depressed; they're dealing with tragedy and trauma every day. I think that's also in the photos -- once people overlook the beautiful colors, they will see what's really going on."

The exhibit offers a more subtle and nuanced portrait of the refugees' lives than other images photographers have brought back from the embattled region -- nowhere are the ubiquitous scenes of starvation, destitution and disease often associated with the words "refugee camp." Instead, women study together, men share meals in tribally decorated tents, children laugh carelessly in a sandstorm, a father reads to his child. The photographs collectively serve to capture the gamut of emotions experienced by a people forced to accept the maxim: life goes on.

Sherry Frumkin, owner of the gallery where Grover's works are on display, said the show highlights the artist's talent for bringing foreign crises home to a relatable level. "I admire what she does," Frumkin said at the exhibit's opening reception Oct. 18. "She is an excellent photographer and an incredible humanitarian. She puts her camera where her heart is."

As part of her mission in Iridimi, Grover documented the success of JWW's ongoing Solar Cooker Project, which distributes solar cookers to Darfuri women to reduce their dependence on wood-burning stoves. Women who leave camp boundaries to search for firewood in the bush are frequently beaten and raped by nearby villagers vying for the same dwindling natural resources.

"The problem of rape is huge outside the camp," Grover said. "With solar cooking, the women don't really need to go out. They have a new tool to protect themselves, and they've learned a new skill. It's the simplest idea, and it's really transforming the lives of women and girls."

Grover's six-minute documentary short, "The Women of Iridimi -- the Story of the Jewish World Watch Solar Cooker Project," plays on a flat-screen TV on one gallery wall alongside her photographs. The film illustrates the

benefits of solar cooking to refugee women at Iridimi, the first camp where the Solar Cooker Project was tested.

The stories and images Grover brought back from Chad underscore the importance of refugee relief programs, said Tzivia Schwartz-Getzug JWW executive director.

"Barbara gave us a very clear visual perspective on what is happening there," she said. "Her photographs beautifully document life for the refugees. It's been incredibly helpful in getting the story out and making it understandable and real for our supporters."

Since its inception in 2004, JWW has provided 15,000 solar cookers to women in refugee camps. Among their other humanitarian projects are the construction of medical clinics and water wells, the distribution of educational and hygiene supplies to refugee children, and the inception of a water-reclamation program that uses recycled "gray water" -- water used to bathe, wash dishes or clean laundry -- to irrigate fruit and vegetable gardens. The more self-sustaining a camp becomes, Schwartz-Getzug said, the better protected its inhabitants will be.

Grover is now working with Facing History and Ourselves and JWW to turn her exhibit into a classroom by inviting local teachers and students to the gallery. Grover hopes the installation will educate students about the Darfur crisis and promote social action. Classes from Crossroads School, Oakwood School and Wildwood School are already scheduled to visit.

"I hope they get a better understanding of the struggle that refugees, in general, go through, and especially the people of Darfur," Grover said. "The fighting has subsided, but refugees are still living in subhuman conditions. I hope people take away a sense that they can make a difference in a world crisis."

In the meantime, Grover wants to visit Iridimi again -- to reconnect with the refugees with whom she bonded last year, and to follow up on their progress.

"I'd like to continue documenting the crisis," Grover said, adding that the concept of tikkun olam (healing the world) is a driving factor in her work. "It's important to understand how peoples' lives have changed over time. They're living in a traumatic limbo. They came from hell and they're learning how to reclaim their hope and dignity. From that, we can learn a lot."

Proceeds from the sale of Grover's photographs will benefit JWW's refugee aid and education projects.

Photo: A tribal elder finds a moment of solitude as he makes his way home across the seemingly endless sands of the Iridimi Refugee Camp. Over 17,000 Darfur refugees live in the camp's four square miles. Photo by Barbara Grover

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